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ABSTRACT

This report describes a program for decreasing student aggressive behavior when confronted with conflict. The targeted population consisted of four fourth grade classrooms in a growing middle class community. The problems of aggressive behavior were documented with classroom surveys, discipline and peer mediation referrals, records of parent contacts, and class time lost due to inappropriate behaviors. A review of solution strategies suggested by peer mediation and authors in the field, combined with an analysis of the surveys on conflict and its setting, resulted in the selection of conflict resolution as a method of intervention. This process involved defining the characteristics of conflict, teaching the components of conflict resolution, and then using a literature to present these strategies. Results indicated that student's perceptions of conflict changed, recognizing that conflict is an inevitable occurrence, however, they were not always able to implement the strategies when faced with a conflict. (Contains 48 references and 5 appendixes.) (RJM)

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CONFLICT RESOLUTION THROUGH LITERATURE

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An Action Research Project Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the School of Education in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Masters of Arts in Teaching and Leadership

Saint Xavier University & IRI/Skylight
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Abstract

This report describes a program for decreasing student aggressive behavior when confronted with conflict. The targeted population consists of four fourth grade classrooms in a growing middle class community, located in a northern suburb of a large Midwestern city. The problems of aggressive behavior will be documented with classroom surveys, discipline and peer mediation referrals, records of parent contacts, and class time lost due to inappropriate behaviors.

Analysis of probable cause indicates children observe and practice inappropriate social skills related to conflict. Both home and societal messages reinforce these inappropriate responses.

A review of solution strategies suggested by peer mediation and authors in the field, combined with an analysis of the surveys on conflict and its setting, resulted in the selection of conflict resolution as a method of intervention. The process involved the following steps: defining the characteristics of conflict, teaching the components of conflict resolution, and using literature to process these skills.

Post intervention data indicated a mixed effect on the targeted behaviors. Student's perceptions of conflict changed, however, they were not always able to transfer the strategies when faced with a conflict.

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CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM STATEMENT AND CONTEXT

General Statement of the Problem

The students of the targeted fourth grade classes exhibit aggressive behavior when confronted with conflict. Evidence for the existence of the problem includes documented discipline meetings, detention notices, class time lost to inappropriate behaviors, and referrals to peer mediation.

Immediate Problem Context

The school contains grades three through five and is located within close proximity to the primary as well as the middle school site. As of April 1996, the enrollment was 1,516 students out of the district total of 4,659 students. There were 531 third graders, 492 fourth graders, and 493 fifth graders. These numbers include special education students. Ethnic characteristics of the student population are as follows: 82.8% White Non-Hispanic, 7.1% Hispanic, 5.8% Asian/Pacific Islander, 4.0% Black, and 0.4% Native American. The average class size is 28 students across all three grade levels. Low income students comprise 4% of the population; this figure is slightly above the district percentage yet far below the state levels. The school consists of 2% limited English proficient students which is

somewhat below the district percentage of 3% and the state percentage of 6%.

The attendance rate for this site when compared to similar sites in northern Illinois is 96%; the student mobility rate is 11%. The truancy rate is less than 1% and involves only five chronic truants. The pupil-teacher ratio is 21:1.

The school has 120 staff members consisting of 99 certified staff and 21 support staff. The ethnicity is 99.2% White Non-Hispanic and 0.8% Asian/Pacific Islander. Ninety percent of the staff is female and 10% is male. The average experience level of the teachers is 11 years, and 34% of the teachers have Master's Degrees or beyond. The average operating expenditure per pupil is $4,537 which is slightly lower than comparative elementary schools of the same type and size. This is approximately $1,000 lower than the state expenditure.

The daily schedule devotes 60 minutes to the teaching of mathematics, 30 minutes each to science and social studies, and 150 minutes to English (which includes all areas of language arts).

According to the Illinois Goal Assessment Program (IGAP), the school has identified planned improvement in all subject areas as well as in staff development. The goal is to provide more problem-based learning experiences across all content areas, increase student writing skills through the use of the Power Writing Process, and concentrate more upon learning activities in math computation for grades three through eight. Also included is (1) the aiding of teachers

in the establishment of consistent guidelines for the development of student portfolios in language arts, (2) training teachers in the Power Writing Process in order to standardize it, and (3) involving teachers in in-services to implement three-way conference skills as a means of improving parent communication regarding student performance.

The Surrounding Community

The community is located in a northern suburb of a large Midwestern city. It is 35 miles from an international airport and in close proximity to a major interstate highway system. This area encompasses 35 square miles and comprises several unincorporated subdivisions and small villages. Within the last decade this community has been transformed from a predominately rural setting to a mobile, white collar, bedroom community.

The population of the area is approximately 35,000. The 1990 census shows a population consisting of 93% White Non-Hispanic, 4% Hispanic, with Asian/Pacific Islander, African American, and Native American making up the remaining 3%. According to the district demographic analysis, the overall population of the community has grown by 54% since the beginning of the decade. Although this growth has impacted the school drastically, it has not changed the demographic or economic makeup of the community.

The level of education acquired by the adult community members is as follows: 29% are non-high school graduates, 26% are high school graduates, 24% have some college background, and 21% hold a Bachelor's Degree or beyond.

According to the 1990 census figure, the median family household income for this area is $45,000.

Employment characteristics of the existing population are represented by major corporations, retail, manufacturing, amusement, health care, military, and educational fields.

The school district is unique in that it is a campus setting in which all K-8 students are bused. It includes a primary building (K-2), intermediate building (3-5), and a middle school (6-8).

The total district population is 4,700. In five years the projected enrollment is 6,408; this represents a 59.6% increase. The student population is 82.6% White Non-Hispanic, 7.8% Hispanic, 5.9% Asian/Pacific Islander, 3.4% African American, and 0..3% Native American. Of this student population, 3.3% exhibit limited English proficiency.

The faculty population is 260, of which 85.6% are female and 14.4% are male. The faculty consists of 98.1% White Non-Hispanic, 0.9% Hispanic, 0.9% Asian Pacific Islander, 0.0% African American, and 0.0% Native American. The faculty characteristics indicate that 66.1% hold Bachelor's Degrees and 33.9% hold Master's Degrees and above. The average teaching experience is 10.1 years. There are 214 tenured teachers and 46 non-tenured teachers. The pupil-teacher ratio is 20.7:1. The pupil-administrator ratio is 398.9:1. The average administrator's salary is $75,903, and the average teacher's salary is $34,389. The operating expenditure per pupil is $4,537 which is slightly lower than comparative schools of the same type and size; this is approximately $1,000 lower than the state expenditure.

The district administration includes one superintendent of schools, one assistant superintendent of business services, one director of curriculum and instruction, one director of pupil personnel services, one director of building grounds and transportation, four principals, and five assistant principals.

The community is characterized by active parent involvement. The most supportive groups include the Parent Teacher's Association, friends of the school, and volunteers of the school. The school has a history of financial and growth concerns. Building referendums have been more successful than educational referendums. A middle school is under construction and will be ready for occupancy August 1997. Some issues currently under consideration are year round school and reconfiguration of existing buildings.

A peer mediation program was initiated at our site at the beginning of the 1995-1996 school year. Ten fourth graders were trained as mediators at the beginning of the school year, and seven more were trained during the second semester. By the end of the 1995-1996 school year, there were a total of sixteen fourth grade mediators still involved in the program. One fourth grader dropped out when he moved out of state.

The training took place over a two day period of discussion and some group building activities. Following the initial two days of training, the mediators met approximately every two weeks to concentrate on the six step mediation process. There was much practice, and group discussion was involved in the training activities.

Every student's classroom was given an in-service on the peer mediation program during the first quarter. Each classroom was shown a role-play and instructed on how the peer mediation program was to be accessed at our site. Each student was given a conflict survey to find out his/her opinion on conflict.

In an effort to build on this peer mediation base program started in the 1995-1996 school year, we have initiated our work in conflict resolution in the targeted classrooms for the 1996-1997 school year. We have done this in an effort to help reinforce and expand the efforts at our site to establish a more peaceable school.

National Context of Problem

Dealing with conflict is an international concern. "Every child today is affected by violence. They bring the effects of that exposure with them to the classroom" (Garbarino, 1995, p. 66). Television shows and movies both have many examples of violence as solutions to conflict. On television, weapons like guns and knives are used to kill and maim others or to solve a problem. Physical fighting and other acts of strength are used to suppress the enemy, often in a violent, bloody manner. War and weapons of war are glorified by segments of our society. Right wing militia groups such as the Freemen and Minute Men endorse the use of war strategies to defend their views and beliefs. The extreme of this would be the terrorism such as the bombing of the Oklahoma Federal Building. Nightly newscasts are inundated with violence. Students watch renowned athletes such as Charles Barkley fight during games and never lose

their fame. In some cases it only proves to make them more popular. Hockey players are encouraged to break into fist fights and are applauded for doing so. If this kind of fighting were on the streets, the participants would be arrested for assault. Children today live in a society in which superiority and winning are considered desired outcomes. Being different in any way is an open invitation to ridicule. Challenging the wants of a peer or disagreeing with them often leads to violent ends.

Teaching used to be much different. In the 1940's, the main behavior problems were running in the halls, talking out of turn, and chewing gum. Today's transgressions include physical and verbal violence, incivility, and for some schools, drug abuse, robbery, assault, and murder(Johnson & Johnson, 1995). A majority of students feel aggressive acts are only playing. An ever larger number do not consider teasing and taunting wrong. Students will stick out their leg to trip another student on purpose and then say, "Just kidding!" "Most hate crimes are committed by youths under age twenty-five, and more and more of those crimes are taking place in schools"(Meek, 1992, p.48). Verbal put-downs and name calling are common events in all classrooms. Many students seem to possess amoral attitudes concerning right and wrong. "Adolescent homicide rates have reached the highest in United States' history. Gunfire kills fifteen individuals under the age of nineteen daily. From 1982 to 1992, juvenile arrests for homicides increased 228 percent"(Johnson & Johnson, 1995, p.2).

Educators are concerned with the frequency of aggressive acts and attitudes toward these acts. Research shows that conflict resolution strategies can make a difference in the classroom and community (Garbarino, 1995). It takes time and patience to negotiate solutions. It is not always easy to live up to the agreements made during a mediation session. Although the teaching of conflict resolution takes time from other subjects, it can eliminate the loss of time due to such behaviors (Bodine, Crawford,& Schrumph, 1994).

Teachers need to model resolution techniques and also maintain a climate that invites cooperation and community spirit. "To bring the vision of the peaceable school to fruition, the teacher must first develop a classroom environment conducive to constructive conflict management" (Bodine, Crawford,& Schrumph, 1994, p.15). Students need to practice tolerance and mediation techniques in many settings and situations in order to be able to use them effectively in life situations.

CHAPTER 2

PROBLEM DOCUMENTATION

Problem Evidence

During the 1995-1996 school year, our district was working toward a uniform discipline policy. We began a peer mediation program which resulted in the implementation of conflict resolution techniques. The reasons for instituting these programs were documented by the assistant principal in charge of discipline. There were 453 fourth grade students formally disciplined. The possession of a weapon by one student was the most serious offense recorded. Fighting accounted for 290 of the referrals. This did not include the 44 students cited for disciplinary action from our transportation department. Inappropriate language, disrespect, and insubordination accounted for the next highest total of 110 students. Five students were referred for school vandalism. Action against the remaining three students was for academic problems.

Conferences with our assistant principals in charge of discipline, interviews with other fourth grade teachers, and consulting with our peer intervention coordinator resulted in a finding that violent behavior was being used extensively to solve conflicts.

Peer mediation was initiated at our site at the beginning of the 1995-1996 school year to deal with this problem. A full time peer mediator was hired by the school district to implement the program. He is a trained social worker with an emphasis on conflict resolution. Some important statistics on the number of mediations were recorded at the end of the school year. Third, fourth, and fifth grade students were involved. For the purpose of this project only, fourth grade statistics will be used.

The school year is divided into four quarters during a nine month time span. Twenty-two fourth graders were involved in mediations during the first quarter. Twenty-three fourth grade students participated in mediations during the second quarter. Twenty-two fourth graders in the third quarter, and twenty-four in the fourth quarter were mediated. A total of 91 fourth grade students were involved in mediation. All the mediations during the year were student to student conflicts. Name calling, threats, and rumors being told by others, were among the leading causes of requests for mediation.

Nineteen of the mediations were requested by a teacher. Sixty-nine were requested by another student. Finally, three parents requested mediation for their own children.

The locations of the origins of the disputes varied. Forty-six disputes took place during recess/playground. Thirty-seven occurred in the classroom, five disputes originated on a bus, and three happened in gym class.

To document the extent of poor student behavior in the fourth grade classrooms in the targeted school, a survey was

given to the teachers in the fall of 1996. Out of seventeen fourth grade classrooms, fourteen were returned.

The results of the survey indicated that teachers believed that students needed to improve in the areas of manners, respect, responsibility, self-discipline, sound thinking, and good judgment. A summary of the survey results is presented in Table 1 located in Appendix A.

Students(N=130) were given a true-false survey on conflict. Eighty-six percent of the students believed conflict was a part of life, 27% believed all conflict is bad. Ways to solve conflicts can be learned was marked as true by 84% of the students. Eighty-nine percent believed talking and listening are ways to solve problems, and 68% believed they could learn to manage conflict. Looking at the results of this survey students believed that they could learn to manage conflict. The true-false survey information is presented in Table 2 located in Appendix B.

A second conflict survey was given to the students in the targeted classrooms(N=130). The survey was more specific asking student to rate their own responses to conflict. An often or sometimes response was given by 55% of the students when asked if they would yell back or threaten the person they were having a conflict with. Calling the other person names was a common response by 58% of the students. Forty-nine percent indicated they often or sometimes hit or push back when confronted with conflict. Complete results of this survey are listed in Table 3 in Appendix C. From this survey it was concluded that the majority of students used retaliation in dealing with conflicts.

Probable Causes

Modern day American society has examples of conflict turning into violence on a daily basis. According to Annette Townley as cited in Meek (1992), conflict is just a part of life; that is not the problem. The problem is that we just don't know how to handle conflict. The conflict resolution experts Johnson and Johnson (1992), noted that conflicts occur all the time. They are a normal and inevitable part of life. How conflicts are managed, not their presence determines if they are destructive or constructive. Nightly local and national news programs often tell of violent gang shootings, armed robberies and domestic violence in American homes. Children read and see incidents of violent conflict happening even in our schools. "The mass media influences how people view violence and deviant behavior" (Johnson & Johnson, 1995, p.3). Lane (1995, p. XI), stated, "TV and film tell them that conflict is resolved through loss of blood, on the street, or loss of money in court".

Besides heavy doses of conflict in the reality of the news, children are subjected to fantasy, conflict, and violence for entertainment. Garbarino (1995) maintains violence in today's world runs the gambit from bullying to murder and finds fertile ground in TV programs, movies, videos, and super hero games where it is gussied up and glamorized. Abt and Seesholtz as cited in Johnson and Johnson (1995) agreed that some TV shows obliterate or obscure the boundaries that society has created between good and evil, public and private, shame and pride.

There is some evidence that indicates that attitudes toward conflict may be learned. If parents set a poor example and model inappropriate solutions to conflict, the child may learn aggressive violent and physical responses for disagreements. Thus, this violence is often perpetrated by their own parents. "Aggression is a learned behavior with serious consequences" (Garbarino, 1995, p.66). Johnson and Johnson (1995) contend a conflict can be as small as an argument or as large as a war. Unfortunately, wars are a common occurrence in our world and a solution for many international disagreements. In the opinion of Deborah Brothrow-Stith (as cited in Meek, 1992, p.48), "As a society we promote and glorify violence. We teach our children that violence is fun, successful, and the hero's way...our children learn to choose violence as their primary strategy to deal with anger and conflict".

Because of changes in domestic life in America, we have the break up of many families and the accompanying social isolation. "An inability to talk about feelings, and the chance to vent them often results in violence." (Raibley, 1996, p.A3). According to Johnson and Johnson (1995):

> Today, children are more isolated from parents, extended family members, and other adults than ever before. With isolation comes a lack of socialization. The family, neighborhood, and community dynamics that once socialized young people into the norms of society are often extinct. No one is teaching children how to manage conflicts constructively.(p.3)

Many children grow up with no guidelines for managing their

anger. Diamond (1996) explained that The United States' Marine Corps leadership is concerned that too many young people emerge from their families, schools, and churches without a strong set of moral values.

Some young children develop a pattern of aggressive behavior in elementary school that if left unchecked, can lead to serious acts of violence and crime by age thirty (Garbarino, 1995). Many large segments of our society are inundated with examples of this trend. An eleven year old California girl who had been taunted by neighborhood boys, went home, got a gun, and fired it through the window killing one of the boys and wounding another (Chicago Tribune, July 1996). Garbarino (1995) asserts that every child today is affected by violence--at home, on the streets, in the media--somewhere. Children are by far the most frequent victims of anger and resulting violence (Raibley, 1996). More children are becoming victims in their own family structures. This violence is often perpetrated by their own parents (Raibley, 1996).

Cultural influences seem to be having a negative effect on childrens' attitudes. Eleanor Childs as cited in Logan (1995) contends:

> TV does play a part in some of the violence we see. I blamed drugs and the breakdown of the family, but then I began to think a lot about culture and about how so much of our understanding of character comes from stories. (p.79)

Continuing with Logan (1995), children are exposed to violent images without the guidance and nurturing needed to help them

make hard decisions and choices. The cumulative effect of these influences is leading to more violent outbursts by young people in our country. Violence among young people in society is increasing (Johnson & Johnson, 1996). The conflict epidemic is troubling in its impact on children. Youngsters represent 23% of the victims of assault and robbery although they account for less than 10% of the population. Much of this violence is perpetrated by other young people (Aetna, 1993). Sometimes children who don't fit in or are perceived as different are not accepted. Children who are different are sometimes used by other children as scapegoats (Lickona, 1993).

Not only are crimes against children taking place in their home environments and neighborhoods, but they are becoming real problems for our school structures to deal with effectively. Most hate crimes are committed by youths under age 25, and more and more of those crimes are taking place in schools (Meek, 1992). Violence has become almost routine on school grounds. It is not always easy to change attitudes from the theoretical and apply them to a practical, real life situation. It is one thing to study about and discuss the need to be tolerant on an abstract level. It is another to practice that on a day-to-day basis with the people you are in contact with, Tom Roderick suggests (as cited in Meek, 1992).

Living in a complex, pluralistic society with contradictory and competing value systems has made the average teacher's job very difficult in our public schools. Jean Johnson as cited in Logan (1995) believes given the

mixed messages kids are getting from television and movies, and increasing social problems around them, teachers have to enter the classroom prepared to address the big issues. Family violence, overcrowded prisons, and the increasingly younger age of gang members all testify to the fact that conflict should be a focal point for those professionals working with children (Lane, 1995).

Controlling students' behavior and protecting them from physical danger and negative psychological stress are problems in many classrooms. Conflict can waste learning time (Aetna, 1993). The Illinois Federation of Teachers (1995) stated that in a 1994 Gallup poll, violence and disorder were identified as the biggest problem in public schools. Johnson and Johnson (1995) contend that providing students with an orderly environment and ensuring safety are becoming more difficult in many schools. Anger, frustration, and conflict are as much a part of school life as report cards (Aetna, 1993).

Previously troubled students were corrected verbally with little worry about a violent reaction, but now there is more danger of the student getting physical. Observations by Amsler and Sadella as cited in Johnson and Johnson (1995) showed many teachers spend an inordinate amount of time and energy managing classroom conflicts. According to a survey by the Public Agenda Foundation as cited by The Illinois Federation of Teachers (1995), nearly three out of four people said that academic achievement would be significantly improved by removing constant troublemakers.

Students who are not taught solid, positive guidelines for conflict resolution are causing more problems. Students have different ideas on how to resolve conflicts. Some rely on physical dominance such as threats and violence. Others use verbal attack or getting back. McCormick and Kreidler as cited in Johnson and Johnson (1995) assert that when students poorly manage their conflicts with each other and with faculty, aggression results.

Professionals in school administration and the classroom are searching for new ways to deal with the changing behavioral attitudes they are discovering in their students. In the violent and litigious atmosphere of our society, many who work with children search for the means to make a difference (Lane, 1995).

At our site as with many others, it is not an uncommon occurrence to hear children using name calling to vent their anger over a disagreement. Pushing and shoving when lining up is a daily ritual in many classrooms. Shouting and inappropriate language often happens during disagreements between students not only on the playground, but also in gym and during the more unstructured activities in the classroom.

During the 1995-1996 school year in one targeted classroom, there was one student suspended for physical abuse of a hired, adult supervisor. In another incident a student picked up a metal chair in the classroom and hit another child with it. In still another classroom, a child received an in-school suspension for hitting a handicapped child in a wheelchair over the head in the boy's washroom.

Another serious problem which occurred in a targeted classroom was stealing. One item after another such as baseball cards, school supplies, and personal items like toys that would be used on the playground disappeared mysteriously. It became such a problem that missing items were posted on the wall. One of the thieves was caught near the end of the year, but most items were never returned.

In light of the experiences of 1995-1996 and the results of the fall 1996 surveys, the teachers of the targeted fourth grade classrooms came to the realization that conflict resolution strategies could enhance the classroom experiences.

CHAPTER 3

SOLUTION STRATEGY

Literature Review

Conflict resolution was chosen as a topic for research because of the great need that was discovered in the studies that were conducted in that area. Studies on conflict resolution indicated students were lacking in the skills required to handle negative interaction. In faculty meetings at the targeted school, conflict surfaced as a reoccurring problem. Solutions that successfully dealt with conflict were varied. Conflict resolution experts Johnson and Johnson (1995) believe students need to learn how to manage conflict constructively. Alternatives to using violence to resolve conflicts need to be taught. According to Garofolo, Siegel, and Laub (as cited in Johnson & Johnson, 1995), the key to preventing conflict is to provide students with the adequate attitudinal and behavioral tools needed to keep conflict from escalating into violence. Garbarino (1995) summarized that it is essential that students learn to cope with conflict at the elementary school level. In order to teach conflict resolution, the term must be defined, and the feelings attached need to be emphasized. Appropriate responses must be practiced.

Preventing violence and resolving conflict are interrelated according to Johnson and Johnson (1995). Students need to be taught how to take a cooperative approach to conflicts. From this cooperative approach, positive outcomes such as improved achievement, better problem solving skills, empathy for others, and insight into what is important to one's self are taught and learned. As an example, constructive anger leads to communication and problem solving. Children should be encouraged to verbalize anger, listen, and let it go. A person should be taught to recognize and validate other people's anger. It is important not to take other people's rage personally. Also in an explosive situation, it's best to agree, not argue (Raibley, 1996).

It has been recorded by Owen (1996) that if students can both verbalize their vantage point and listen to that of others; there is a greater chance that an agreement can be reached. It is important for students to realize that everyone has his or her own opinion on an issue. Students must also realize that opinions can change.

"Students need to view a situation from different perspectives and to understand feelings they do not share"(Meek, 1992, p. 49-50). Using the skills of emotional literacy, students can become part of the solution to conflict. The heart of conflict resolution is to listen to and articulate the feelings of another person (Meek, 1992). Empathy and communication are the key to successful conflict resolution.

In Barbara Porro's, Talk It Out Strategy, four main points are emphasized to resolve conflict. First, the students involved in a conflict are taught to stop and cool off. Secondly, they need to talk and listen to each other. Third, solutions that meet both individual's needs should be brainstormed. Finally, they should choose the solution that is agreeable to both and make plans to carry it out.

In the 1970's Quaker teachers became interested in providing non-violence training to children. This resulted in the founding of Children's Creative Response to Conflict Program (CCRC). This program was based on the nonviolent teachings of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. The assumption of this program is that peace is desired universally so that we should study and teach it in our schools (Johnson & Johnson, 1995).

Programs to end violence and develop positive behavior are an accepted solution to classroom conflict. Teaching violence prevention with a nurturing cooperative environment in which the student forms partnerships with the whole community are most successful.

Johnson and Johnson (1995) included the following quote by Franklin Delano Roosevelt: "If civilization is to survive, we must cultivate the science of human relationships--the abilities of all peoples, of all kinds, to live together, in the same world, at peace" (p.13).

Project Objectives and Processes

As a result of increased instructional time devoted to conflict resolution during the period of September 1996 to January 1997, the fourth grade students from the targeted classrooms will increase their ability to use appropriate strategies in solving conflicts both in and

out of the classroom as measured by teacher and student surveys.

In order to accomplish the objective, the following processes are necessary:

1. A plan to create a cooperative classroom through the use of a responsibility approach to discipline and the use of cooperative learning.
2. The use of tolerance as a practice rather than an abstract.
3. Teaching of negotiation techniques.
4. Development of an understanding of cooperative problem solving.
5. Encouragement to talk about and deal constructively with feelings.
6. The use of novels to develop resolution strategies.

Project Action Plan

There are a number of strategies that can be used to help young students deal effectively with the conflict in their lives. It is very important for students to learn to deal with violence at an early age. Interestingly enough, it is rare for children who are not exposed to violence to become aggressive (Garbarino, 1995).

Our plan is designed to be implemented over a fifteen week period. Each week the program is designed to be used only four out of the five days of the school week. By limiting it to four days of the week, allowances can be made for holidays and teacher in-service days which might occur during the fifteen weeks scheduled for the program.

To introduce the students to the program, our first strategy is to discuss Life Rules and Class Expectations with an open discussion and prepared sheets used to facilitate the progress of the discussion. Experts in the field of conflict resolution advise presenting techniques of conflict resolution in a calm, rational environment before any angry or emotionally upsetting situations occur.

In the first week, teachers and students will respond to a number of surveys helping them to reflect on their own responses to conflict and what is meant by the concept of conflict.

During the second week, the students will discuss in seven steps the elements of conflict according to Garbarino (1995). This will give the students more of a sense of community and an opportunity to strive toward a common goal. First, we will explain the topic to the students. We will tell the students how they will be reading, writing, talking, and drawing about conflict. Second, physical and verbal conflict will be defined. Third, how conflict feels will be discussed; does it make you scared, mad, nervous, or hurt? Fourth, the students will be asked to reflect and ask themselves why they think people hurt each other. Fifth, the class will discuss make believe conflict as presented on TV programs and in the movies. Sixth, they will examine and discuss conflict and violence they witness in the local and national news. Finally, the focus will be turned to the types of conflict that occur at home and school.

By using these seven steps, students will learn ways of defusing conflicts before they escalate. Also, they will

learn to stop and think before they react to a conflict situation (Meek, 1992).

Week three focuses on feeling angry and dealing with it. A story is used to prompt reflection of their own anger, and activities designed to help them think about their responses to that anger are shared with the class. This is followed by a presentation of some solid, tested rules for fighting fair and an opportunity to role play a conflict situation where the participants adhere to successful guidelines for fighting fair. A conflict resolution strategy wheel which lists approaches that may be used in conflict is shared with the students. It also contains sample responses which the students can use to deal with conflict fairly.

The fourth week will be used to read short, situational, conflict stories and discuss student generated questions and steps of good conflict resolution. Reflection questions designed to help students think about what should or could have been done to better resolve the conflict will be discussed.

Weeks five to nine will concentrate on the use of children's literature in the Pegasus reading program adopted by our school district. The issue of conflict and its resolution is embedded in many curriculum areas. How to resolve conflict will be addressed in an educational manner, and lessons about it will be incorporated into existing plans. A novel entitled <u>The Kid in the Red Jacket</u> will be used to discuss conflict experienced by the characters in the story. The main character experiences difficulties after

moving to a new neighborhood. According to Jean Johnson (as cited in Logan, 1995):

> Good literature serves as a neutralizer in a discussion about character and ethics. Students can comfortably discuss the problems and choices faced by a book's character without the sting of infringing on anyone's personal beliefs or background. (p,75)

This will bring about a natural progression to thinking about conflict resolution in their own lives. A conflict form and anger thermometer will also be used to help students focus on the real conflict and anger they experience in their personal lives.

The Pegasus novel, <u>There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom</u> will be the next book used to discuss conflict in literature during the tenth to the fourteenth week of the program. The boy in the story has trouble fitting in at home and at school. This will reinforce the concept that conflict is a natural part of life and that skills can be learned to deal with it. A conflict form and anger thermometer will be used again to relate their own real life experiences to what they were reading about in the novel.

These novels from our series were chosen because they feature children making choices, explore problems children can grasp, and are not written around an obvious answer.

The fifteenth week will be used to summarize the program. Surveys will be repeated to discern what changes have taken place in the attitudes of the students. Finally, an entire class reflective graphic on conflict resolution

will sum up their feelings and thoughts on the positives, minuses, and what they found interesting about the fifteen week program.

Ideally, new skills and positive attitudes will have been formed to deal with the real conflict in their lives, and they will be better equipped to cope with the ups and downs of conflict they are bound to experience.

Methods of Assessment

In order to assess the effects of the intervention, teachers and students will be resurveyed. Also, data will be gathered from teacher surveys, student surveys, data from the assistant principal in charge of discipline, and data from the peer mediation coordinator. Behavior checklists will again be used. Finally, teachers will look for evidence of transfer of learning.

CHAPTER 4

PROJECT RESULTS

Historical Description of the Intervention

The objective of this project was to reduce the incidence of conflict in the classroom setting. The implementation of conflict resolution strategies and the use of a literature based reading series to present these strategies were selected to affect the desired changes.

Literature was used to teach conflict resolution skills and was also employed as an instructional technique in delivering subject matter content. Conflict skills were taught using the situations depicted in the readings.

During the second week of the school year, rules and behavioral expectations were established and maintained throughout the intervention. The original plans called for fifteen weeks of focusing on conflict resolution strategies and techniques. Four lessons were planned each week to allow for changes in the regular school week. Thus, such things as institute days, conferences, field trips, assemblies, and snow days would not interfere with the timing of the plan. The target skills chosen for this project included recognizing conflict, defusing conflict, and creating a peaceable environment. The methods used to strengthen these

skills were role playing, group activities, projects, and class discussions.

During week one, the project began with a presentation and discussion of life rules and class expectations (see Appendices D & E). These were posted in the targeted classrooms. This activity was followed by two student surveys in the four targeted classrooms and a teacher survey for seventeen fourth grade classrooms at the survey's site. Students were given a survey with fifteen typical responses to conflict. The students were to rate how often they would use each response. Three responses were selected to be monitored for change. Those three included yell back or threaten the person, call the other person names, and hit or push back. The second survey used a true-false format to establish students' understanding of conflict.

Week two began with students illustrating four examples of conflict. During the next session students were given a situation and asked to write how they felt in that situation and what they felt like doing in that situation. When this was completed, students discussed the feelings they described. On the third day of the week human feelings were discussed, and the conclusion was drawn that people express their feelings in different ways. Students were then asked to describe in writing the things they would do or say to express their feelings in different situations.

After presenting and role playing various conflict models highlighted over the previous two weeks, teachers in the targeted classrooms began keeping a behavior tally (see Appendix F). The tally sheet included behaviors such as

verbal and physical fighting, disrespect, and inappropriate language.

As tallies were being kept, it was found that the areas indicated on the tally sheet often did not reflect the types of conflict that were experienced in the classrooms. In one of the targeted classrooms, the types of conflict were often more serious than those listed on the sheet. There was one hearing impaired child who refused to wear a hearing apparatus in the classroom. This student would hide under a table or chair, refuse to cooperate, cry, and withdraw from the authority figure. Another child spit out his lunch on the floor to see what it looked like. A third child was found to qualify for a self-contained BD classroom. A fourth child qualified for BD resource after it was determined he lacked the skills to interact positively with the other students. In the second classroom, a student diagnosed with a pervasive emotional disorder didn't fit any of the behaviors listed on the tally sheet. Any interactions with the child had to be on the student's own terms; this made the peer conflict model difficult or impossible to use. In the third and fourth classrooms, the behaviors were not prevalent enough to show meaningful documentation. The ineffectiveness of the tally sheet necessitated a change in focus for documentation of conflict. It was decided to focus on the student surveys for evidence of need for conflict skills. Furthermore, it was found that the parent contact record sheet and the discipline record sheet were not applicable. The types of infractions as noted previously in the first

two classrooms were dealt with by other than the classroom teacher because of school policies.

To begin week three, students read a situational story dealing with anger. Students then answered questions about the story and discussed their responses. The next day students again read a situational story concerning a fight. The students then had to identify the problems from each character's point of view.

The rules for fighting fair were identified, listed, and discussed. They were then posted in the targeted classrooms. The posters also contained a list of behaviors that represented unfair fighting. Students role played examples of fighting fair.

Finally, that week the students constructed a conflict wheel which offered the student twelve desirable strategies for solving the conflict. The teachers in the targeted classrooms then presented conflict story situations to the students for response. Following that, two students were chosen to act out the situation. They would conclude by spinning the wheel to choose an appropriate response to end the conflict. This exercise helped the students realize that there were many options to choose from to successfully conclude an argument.

The next week a number of situational stories were read which illustrated understanding other peoples' point of view. Among these was Miss Ruphius by Barbara Cooney. This story highlights a woman's goal to make the world a better place for others. Another story, The Pain and the Great One by Judy Blume deals with sibling rivalry. After reading these

stories, the students pinpointed the theme of the story. They were encouraged to put themselves in the place of a character from one of the stories and to respond using the character's point of view. Other students then pointed out the conflict resolution techniques that would have been helpful to fairly resolve the character's situation.

During weeks five through nine, the Pegasus unit on The Kid in the Red Jacket by Barbara Park was the literature used to examine and practice conflict resolution skills. Lesson one of the conflict resolution unit consisted of prereading activities in which overhead transparencies were displayed to discuss the conflict escalator, facts about conflict, the principles of conflict resolution, a person's needs to be healthy, the outcomes of conflict, responses to conflict, sending clear messages, being a better listener, point of view, emotions, and healthy relationships. This took most of the first week in this unit. As an evaluation of these lessons, the children were paired to search through newspapers for news stories involving conflict. They described the conflict and the persons involved; they then checked to see how the conflict was resolved.

Lesson two introduced the book and its characters. Students were asked to predict the types of conflict the characters might experience either alone or together after being given a brief synopsis of the characters.

From this point, lesson three was to read the first chapter of the book. In order for students to become more aware of emotions and reactions, students were given emotional scenarios and requested to draw a face showing the

emotion provoked by that scenario. When this was completed, drawings were shared and discussed.

The next lesson was to read chapter two. In this chapter, the characters of the main family were introduced. The class then discussed the members of the family, how they got along, and their current relationship. Each student drew and colored a picture of themselves and their family. Volunteers were asked to share their illustrations with the class.

The following lesson involved the reading of chapter three. Students constructed a sociogram on the characters of Howard and Molly. This was to help the students understand their relationship. The following day students were asked to role play scenarios to illustrate win-win situations, win-lose situations, and lose-lose situations. The short story, "The Zaks", was read to the students, and the students were asked to develop win-win outcomes to the story.

After students read chapter four, the four basic needs of power, belonging, fun, and freedom were explained. These needs were discussed with an emphasis on the story being read. Students wrote paragraphs about people who had annoyed them. After that students analyzed and illustrated how the character, Howard, could feel alone while being in a crowded lunchroom.

In lesson seven, chapter five was read. Students examined Howard's feelings toward Molly and how they were changing. Each student drew a picture of a pair of shoes representing their own uniqueness. Later students wrote a phone conversation between Howard and Molly after reading the

next chapter. Students role-played scenes from these last two chapters using puppets.

In chapters nine and ten, students used a letter format to write an apology note to someone. As a culminating activity to this whole unit, students were placed in groups of four. The groups each selected a chapter from the book, wrote a script, constructed puppets, and performed a skit. During this unit videos promoting conflict resolution were shown. As a read aloud, the book, Skinnybones, by Barbara Park was also used to promote the conflict resolution skills being stressed.

During weeks ten through fourteen, There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom by Louis Sacher was the literature used to further conflict resolution skills. In pairs students created a poster on peace using the peace poem. Students were given a peace booklet to support the lessons in this unit. Page three of the story was read to the class to set the stage for the conflicts that would be addressed. Students read chapters one through ten, and the conflicts were discussed. Students worked in groups to design character maps representing each character.

Peace and communication transparencies were reviewed. The James Stevenson book, That's Exactly the Way It Wasn't, was read aloud, and perceptions were discussed. Students completed page three of the peace booklet. The Point of View glasses were presented to contrast Bradley's perceptions with those of others. The targeted classes then sketched a still-life of a basket of fruit to illustrate perceptions from different points in the room. To further demonstrate this,

students were given sunglasses with various colored lenses and asked to describe what they saw. Students continued to work in their peace booklet. During these lessons students also read further chapters in the novel. After reading chapter 38, the classes filled in the Anger Thermometer to represent their perceptions of Bradley's reaction. The remaining chapters in the book were completed. To wrap up this unit, students debated the conflict strategies they felt Bradley had learned to implement. The Best Christmas Pageant Ever was read as a supplement. The main characters in this book portrayed poor examples of conflict skills.

In the final week of this project, the How I Respond to Conflict survey and The Conflict Survey were repeated. Students created a PMI chart to show their thoughts on conflict resolution.

Presentation and Analysis of Results

In order to assess the effects of Conflict Resolution lessons on the targeted students, the surveys used at the start of the project were repeated. This data is presented in Tables 4 and 5.

The intervention appears to have had a mixed effect on the targeted behaviors. Perceptions of conflict as only bad changed by 20%. Students learned to view conflict as neither bad nor good, but inevitable. Conflict is now understood as something that occurs between people when differing views are expressed. The surveys also showed that 80% of the students felt they could manage conflict if it arose. Students know that conflict will occur, yet they also know that it can be managed, which is a positive outcome of the intervention.

Table 4

True-false Survey on Conflict Winter 1997

Statement	True	False
Conflict is a part of life.	117.0	10.0
All conflict is bad.	7.0	120.0
Ways to solve conflict can be learned.	115.5	11.5
Talking and listening are ways to solve problems.	121.0	6.0
I can learn to manage conflict.	101.0	26.0

Table 5

Student Responses to Conflict Winter 1997

Responses	Often	Sometimes	Never
Yell back or threaten the person	8	63	53
Call the other person names	18	68	38
Hit or push back	21	54	48

The student responses to conflict were inconsistent (see Table 5). The number of students who responded that they would often yell back or threaten the person when in a conflict declined by 38% from the fall survey. The students that would never use this response showed insignificant change. Students that would call names sometimes in order to deal with a conflict increased 15% since the previous survey. The most disappointing result of the student responses was the 48% increase in students that would hit or push back.

No change in behavior was seen by the teachers of the targeted classrooms unless the students were made to think about the conflict strategies that were learned. Students may have been more honest in the winter survey because they are more comfortable in their surroundings. Also, because of the age level of the students the responses may be typical of fourth graders. Teachers in the targeted classrooms saw no increase in the incidence of violent responses in the daily routine. This leaves one to suspect the students chose these responses not because it is the method they use but for another purpose.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the presentation and analysis of the data on conflict, the students showed uneven improvement in behavior. The students' attitudes toward conflict changed. The students learned to accept conflict as an occurrence that is inevitable. They also felt more able to manage conflict in a constructive manner. The skills learned during the lessons appeared to have not transferred to interpersonal behavior. Classroom conflict incidents remain constant. While the

children appear to be knowledgeable on the subject, and while attitudes appear to have changed toward conflict, the student's day to day behavior remains the same. The core of students that had the most to gain from these interventions learned the material but failed to utilize the strategies. They continued on with the old responses.

The teachers in the targeted classrooms have found that some students on an individual basis have become more aware of positive choices for resolving conflict. They would suggest options that have been taught throughout the intervention. However, in general, the teachers found that even after weeks of intervention, students would have to be prompted to utilize the strategies.

This model is recommended for use. The lessons were interesting and served to increase the students' awareness of conflict and its solutions. The fact that this provides children with another choice when faced with conflict makes the program worth the effort. The pitfalls of the model are that the students know the material very well but do not transfer it to their own lives. The transfer of learning would have more success if the Conflict Resolution program were initiated school wide. Also, if more teachers taught the literature units integrated with conflict strategies, a school wide effort could be realized. The school also needs to encourage the use of peaceful choices and creating multiple options to resolve dispute. Peer pressure and lack of a school wide program in Conflict Resolution contribute to the limited implementation of these skills. In order for a student to successfully use conflict skills, the other party

involved needs to understand the process. If the other party has not been educated in resolution techniques, more likely than not, an acceptable choice of response will be chosen. For those students involved in an escalating conflict, resolution strategies should be offered as a choice to end the incident rather than punishments being administered to deter the behavior. By offering resolution strategies the students can improve their attitude toward solving conflict peaceably.

In conclusion, this model is recommended because of the heightened awareness provided to the students. Resolving conflicts constructively is a life skill. When conflict arises, the methods used to resolve the incident can turn it from a violent episode to a positive learning experience. Because there are increasing incidents of violent conflict in daily life, these life skills need to be encouraged in the school setting. Students need to realize conflict resolution strategies are a viable alternative. Students should be encouraged to use these strategies in their own lives in order to gain experience with using them and to model the peaceable methods for others.

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APPENDIX B

TABLE 2

Table 2

True-false Survey on Conflict Fall 1996

Statement	True	False
Conflict is part of life.	112	18
All conflict is bad.	35	95
Ways to solve conflict can be learned.	109	21
Talking and listening are ways to solve problems.	116	14
I can learn to manage conflict.	88	42

APPENDIX C

TABLE 3

Table 3

Student Responses to Conflict Fall 1996

Responses	Often	Sometimes	Never
Yell back or threaten the person	13	59	54
Call the other person names	17	58	52
Hit or push back	11	53	63

APPENDIX D

LIFE RULES

Be prompt

Be prepared

Participate

Show respect

Be responsible

APPENDIX E

CLASSROOM EXPECTATIONS

Meet deadlines

Have materials

Listen for instructions

Follow directions

Be a part of the discussion

Complete work

Stay engaged

Honor self and others

Value property

Accept ownership

Plan more effective behavior

APPENDIX F

BEHAVIOR TALLY SHEET

SEPTEMBER 1996

BEHAVIOR	NUMBER OF INCIDENTS
Fighting: Physical	
Fighting: Verbal	
Transportation	
Possession of a weapon	
Inappropriate Language	
Disrespect	
Insubordination	
Vandalism	
Academic Problems	